Mobility and Connections

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Abstract

The last few years have seen an astonishing focusing of attention upon issues of mobility. Politics, social life and increasingly social theory have become a matter of 'contested mobilities' and contested metaphors of the 'mobile life'. And mobility seems central to the way in which people live in an increasingly 'networked society'. Politics and social life seem to involve attempts to channel, to regulate, to enhance or to cease some mobilities as opposed to others

There are some immense movements involved here. There are 760m international journeys every year, a figure soon to pass 1 billion. There are 4 million air passengers each day. 'Travel and tourism' is the largest industry accounting for 11.7% of world GDP, 8% of world exports and 8% of employment. Tens of millions of refugees and asylum seekers roam the globe, with 3 billion people receiving the same income as the richest, mobile 300. Physical mobilities are environmentally costly, with transport accounting for one-third of CO_2 emissions. World car travel is predicted to triple between 1990-2050, there are over half-a-billion cars roaming the globe, and many new countries, such as China, are developing an 'automobile culture'. Simultaneously there is mobility along the internet: it is only a decade old, it has a faster take-up than any previous technology and 1 billion users are expected by this year. The flows of foreign exchange each day are worth $1.4 trillion, sixty times greater than the flows of world trade of goods and services. And communications 'on the move' are being transformed with new mobile phones more common than land-line phones.

There are five highly interdependent 'mobilities' that form and re-form diverse networks:

- corporeal travel of people for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, migration and escape.

- physical movement of objects delivered to producers, consumers and retailers.

- imaginative travel elsewhere through images of places and peoples upon TV (1 billion worldwide).

- virtual travel often in real time on the internet so transcending geographical and social distance.

- communicative travel through person-to-person messages via letters, telephone, fax and mobile.

Most social research focuses upon one or other of these separate mobilities, such as passenger transport or goods transport or the internet. The ambition of this talk is to examine the profoundly important interconnections between these mobilities that are central

to making and maintaining complex connections in a 'networked society'. Attention will be paid to the concept of mobility 'systems' and the protocols of a 'new mobilities paradigm'.